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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [EINV](#) [ELTN](#) [ETRD](#) [KHIV](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#)
PREL, AF, UZ
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO TERMEZ
HIGHLIGHTS REGION'S STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

REF: A. TASHKENT 764
[1](#)B. TASHKENT 722

Classified By: Pol/Econ Jonathan Davis for reasons 1.4 (B, D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Ambassador Norland made his first trip to Surkhandarya Province June 25-27, visiting a number of strategic sites in and around Termez and meeting with local government officials, representatives of a USAID-supported NGO, and regional human rights activists. The visit highlighted Termez's critical position on an important north-south transport and commercial corridor through Afghanistan and underscored its strategic importance to U.S. and Uzbek security and economic interests. At present, Surkhandarya's economy appears frail and trade across the Afghan border seems relatively limited. Additionally, drug use and HIV/AIDS infections are reportedly on the rise in the region. Improvements in political and economic conditions, however, could help reestablish Termez as a hub for expanded trade and commerce with Afghanistan and reinvigorate the regional economy. Termez could also grow in strategic importance to the United States and its allies as an expanded supply route for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, particularly if conditions in Pakistan and the Khyber Pass continue to remain unstable. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Over June 25-27, Ambassador Norland and emboffs visited Termez and nearby sites in Surkhandarya Province. The trip included a meeting with the Hokim (Mayor) of Termez; a tour of the joint Uzbek-German airbase in Termez; a visit to the Ayratom-Hayraton Border Crossing to Afghanistan (ref A); a meeting with the Director of the USAID-supported Termez Youth Power Center; a discussion with two local human rights activists; and a tour of the Termez City River Port (ref A).

Hokim of Termez Paints Rosy Picture of Regional Economy

¶3. (C) On June 26, Ambassador Norland met with the recently appointed Hokim of Termez, Karakhan Abdujabborovich Tursonov. Tursonov spoke positively about economic and social progress in Termez and Surkhandarya Province more broadly, giving the (somewhat exaggerated) impression of extensive industrial and infrastructural development in the region. In particular, Tursonov heralded the opening of new factories in and around Termez, including an Uzbek-Turkish joint venture to produce flour and an Uzbek-Chinese joint venture to bottle water and other beverages. Tursonov confirmed that there were no U.S.-Uzbek joint ventures in the region but expressed hope that such projects would be undertaken in the future.

¶4. (C) In acknowledgement of President Karimov's designation of 2008 as the Year of Youth, Tursonov highlighted the importance of providing young Uzbeks with educational opportunities and jobs. Tursonov told emboffs that Termez was making significant investments that would improve local education and expand employment opportunities. He also noted that Termez City provides office space free of charge to the USAID-supported Youth Power Center (YPC), and he fully endorsed the Ambassador's planned visit to the YPC that same day.

Germans to Draw Down Presence at Termez Airbase

¶5. (C) During a visit to the joint Uzbek-German airbase in Termez on June 26, German Operational Air Wing (OAW) Commander Colonel Willi Kamuf informed the Ambassador of the Germans' plan to downsize their military presence in Termez by August 30. Kamuf noted that the drawdown would reduce the airbase's status from that of an OAW with eight C-160 military transport planes and over 200 German military personnel to that of an air transport hub with around 80 military personnel and no aircraft stationed permanently on base. The German OAW currently transports ISAF personnel, VIPs, and supplies to and from Afghanistan, in addition to serving as an emergency extraction and medical evacuation hub. These mission roles will remain unchanged after the downsizing. Kamuf told emboffs that the OAW's CH-53 helicopters had already been transferred to the German airbase in Mazar-e-Sharif and reported that the C-160s would follow soon.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: The drawdown of the German presence is likely to have minor short to medium-term economic repercussions for Termez, perhaps similar to those experienced after the U.S. departure from Karshi Khanabad. As one possible indicator of the positive economic impact of the German presence to date, Colonel Kamuf noted that Termez now boasts over fifty Internet cafes as compared with none when the Germans first arrived. End comment.

Director of Youth Center Cites Growing Drug, AIDS Problems

¶7. (C) During a June 26 meeting, the Director of the USAID-supported Termez Youth Power Center (YPC), Oliya Ilmuradova, informed the Ambassador of rising drug use among youth in Surkhandarya Province. Ilmuradova cited a lack of job prospects and extremely poor regional economic conditions as factors contributing to increased drug use. In particular, she highlighted limited economic opportunities for young women, noting that approximately 80 percent of Surkhandarya's women do not receive higher education or occupational training. Ilmuradova also informed emboffs that HIV/AIDS presents a significant and growing problem. Denau, a town in northern Surkhandarya Province, reportedly has the second highest concentration of HIV/AIDS cases in Uzbekistan.

¶8. (SBU) Ilmuradova informed emboffs that the Termez YPC offers a number of educational and social programs for at-

risk youth to help combat these growing problems, including courses on hair styling and embroidery for women, computer literacy and English language classes, and a number of regularly scheduled sports and social activities for youth. The YPC also has a Resource Center stocked with English-language books that was established with support from a Democracy Commission Grant from Embassy Tashkent. Ilmuradova expressed appreciation for U.S. support of the Termez YPC and confirmed the center's close relationship with the Termez hokimyat, noting that the YPC receives free office space from the city. She also informed emboffs that some YPC employees are working on a voluntary basis while the center seeks additional sources of funding.

Local Rights Activists Cite Desperate Economic Conditions

¶9. (C) On June 26, the Ambassador met with two human rights activists from the town of Boysun in Surkhandarya Province: Fakhriddin Tilloev, chief of the unregistered "Ozod Fukaro" ("Free Citizen") human rights group and a member of the

opposition Erk political party, and Abdurayemov Majid, a freelance journalist who served four years in prison for publishing articles critical of the Government of Uzbekistan (GOU). Tilloev and Majid informed emboffs of extremely low standards of living in Surkhandarya, including widespread unemployment, inflation, problems with potable water, and limited to no industrial investment in the region. Tilloev reported that 800,000 of Surkhandarya's two million residents are now working in Russia and other countries, and remittances from those working abroad reportedly sustain the bulk of those who remain. He noted that unemployment has become such a vast problem that last year a public demonstration against local economic conditions was held before the regional hokim's office, leading to his dismissal and the recent appointment of a new hokim with the expectation that he would be "stronger." Tilloev reported that use of heroin, opium, and hashish is on the rise in Surkhandarya and confirmed reports of the region's growing HIV/AIDS epidemic. Tilloev also informed emboffs of a rumor that the GOU is building a new prison in Surkhandarya modeled on Uzbekistan's notorious Zhaslyk prison. (Note: Tilloev reported to emboffs an alleged case of torture and imprisonment of four supposed Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Surkhandarya Province during a June 20 meeting in Tashkent. Ref B. End note.)

¶10. (C) Comment: The discussion with Tilloev and Majid was at times rambling, and in many cases the assertions appeared to be based more in rumor than in fact. At one point, Tilloev claimed German soldiers were raping Uzbek women in Termez and reported that pregnancies and births resulted in several instances. We have found no credible reports to corroborate these rumors. Despite doubts about certain claims, contacts like Tilloev and Majid remain valuable sources of information in a region that remains difficult to penetrate due to the lack of a free press and restrictions on the flow of information to and from Surkhandarya Province, which remains a closed area due to its proximity to Afghanistan. Indeed, Tilloev reported that internet access in Termez is highly censored and restricted, and internet access outside of Termez is reportedly nonexistent. End comment.

Comment

¶11. (C) Termez--and Surkhandarya Province more generally--occupies a strategic position along a north-south transport corridor stretching from South Asia through Afghanistan to Central Asia and beyond. Despite a generally rosy assessment by the Hokim of Termez, economic conditions appear to be deteriorating in Surkhandarya, and with the downsizing of the German airbase in Termez, the economy is likely to weaken further before it improves. Still, the region's centrality to a very significant transport and commercial corridor suggests significant economic potential

if political and economic conditions improve. Surkhandarya and Termez in particular could also grow in strategic importance as an expanded supply route for U.S. and ISAF forces in Afghanistan, particularly if conditions in Pakistan and the Khyber Pass continue to remain unstable.

¶12. (C) At present, however, GOU officials appear to view the Uzbek border with Afghanistan as a liability rather than an opportunity. A quote of President Karimov on the frontispiece of a book on Termez's history captures the essence of the current mindset: "Termez has always been an iron stronghold against enemies who threatened our country

at its southern border, and today it remains a powerful fortress on our southern frontier." If and when this mindset changes, Termez and Surkhandarya Province more broadly could stand to benefit significantly from expanded commercial traffic along this historically important north-south corridor.

NORLAND